



# Young Women Civic Leaders



## **YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE LOWER MAINLAND OF BC**

### **NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT – PHASE 1**

Prepared by Justice Education Society of BC



Status of Women  
Canada

Condition féminine  
Canada

This report captures the process and the findings of the needs assessment undertaken as a part of the Young Women Civic Leaders project by the Justice Education Society of BC with the financial support from Status of Women Canada.

This version of the report captures the initial findings that informed the development of the project. The second phase will be completed in the summer of 2014.

Project team gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Dr. Catherine Murray (Simon Fraser University) for her support of the project, and the review and additions to this report. We also would like to thank all the interns, volunteers, and community partners who contributed to this project.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Civic engagement' is a broad term which covers a wide range of ways in which citizens engage in their communities, including interaction with the municipal governance and administration. In the past several decades there has been a marked decline in young people's participation in formal political processes in many Western democracies, including Canada. The gender dynamic in this process is poorly understood, and is rarely studied. For the purpose of developing a project that would address the needs of young women in our target communities, we undertook a needs assessment that combined qualitative and quantitative methods and reached 378 youth in the Lower Mainland.

Our top findings can be summarized as follows:

1. While there are efforts to engage youth in the formal political and civic processes, many youth still feel disconnected due to the lack of knowledge about how those processes work and how to get involved, or they do not believe that their engagement would make any difference.
2. The key barrier for youth involvement in the formal civic and political processes is the formal structure, which includes the use of inaccessible language and rigid protocols or weak social media outreach design.
3. Most youth are civically engaged on the level of volunteering and organizing for a cause. However, most of those activities seem to be taking place while they are in the high school, and do not translate into formal political engagement later on. Young women are usually very active in taking leadership roles during that time of their life, but their participation declines once they graduate.
4. There is a negative stereotyping of those who are actively engaged among youth. Such stigmatization can be especially hard on young women, as their activism and leadership can be seen as not fitting with the dominant gender norms.
5. Young women and girls often face gendered barriers to civic and political participation which are usually invisible, and are rarely problematized. Compounded with age-specific barriers, they present a real challenge for creating equal opportunities for young women and girls to success in civic and political arenas, and to have their voices heard.

These findings were consistent with an extensive survey of academic and practitioner-based literature on the topic from a number of disciplines, and were used to design the Young Women Civic Leaders project.

## INTRODUCTION

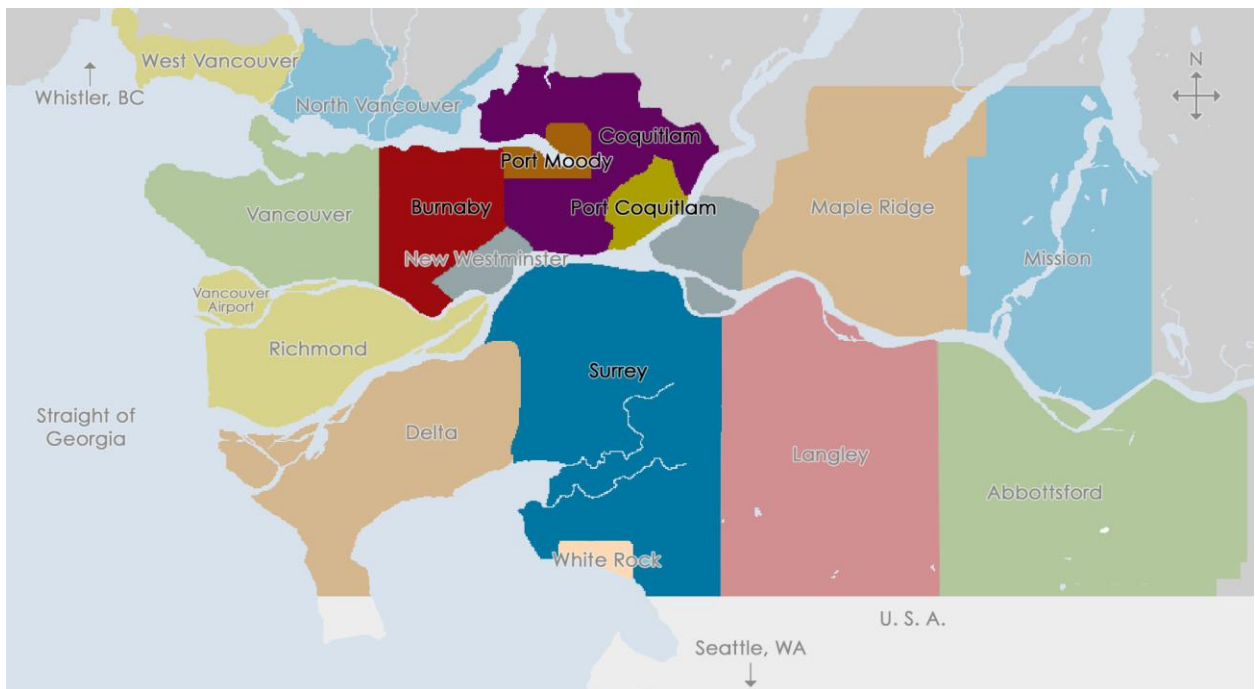
### PROJECT OVERVIEW

Young Women Civic Leaders is a two year project (2012-2014) in seven British Columbia communities that promotes and encourages full participation of young women at all levels of civic, political and community life. It is funded by Status of Women Canada under the theme 'Setting the Stage for Girls and Young Women to Succeed'.

The project objectives are:

- To identify and reduce the existing barriers to young women's full participation by working collaboratively with community partners, institutions and other stakeholders;
- To work with young women and girls to develop their capacity and leadership skills so that they can effectively identify and respond to the barriers that affect their participation.

The target communities are Burnaby, Surrey, Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Anmore and Belcarra.



## CONCEPTUALIZING 'CIVIC ENGAGEMENT'

We understand civic engagement as the participation in formal and informal political processes that address community needs and seek to improve the quality of life for individuals, groups and whole communities. As a form of democratic participation, civic engagement implies being an active citizen in any way in service to the community, and on any level - locally to globally. There are a wide range of ways in which citizens can engage in their communities (however they define them) in order to improve conditions for others, for themselves, or to help shape their communities' futures. This definition, then, conceptualizes 'civic engagement' in a very broad sense. However, the term can be used in a more narrow sense referring to direct participation in formal city governance and administration. In both definitions civic engagement includes the expression of political actions. Conceptually it is often difficult to draw the line between civic and political engagement.

Some examples of civic engagement include:

1. Participating in or serving the community or in local/national /international community and volunteer organizations;
2. Participating in the elections;
  - Voting
  - Volunteering at the elections
  - Volunteering to mobilize the voters
3. Engagement with municipal politics;
  - Sitting on city councils, Advisory Committees, Task Forces, boards
  - Making presentations to the council
4. Volunteering with a municipality;
5. Rallying and protesting;
6. Signing petitions;
7. Writing letters to political representatives;
8. Campaigning on various issues through social media, membership in associations and groups; and/or
9. Active membership in a political party.

## CONCEPTUALIZING ‘YOUTH’

As many experts in social psychology and education identify, “youth” is a flexible and constructed category. For the purposes of this project, we are focusing on youth ages 15-25. Secondly, even in this age category there is an internal life course category dominated by the experience of being part of educational institutions that act as the key vehicles of socialization. For both young women and men the experience of parenting can also radically alter one’s life course during this time.

## PROJECT FOCUS

For the purposes of this project, while we understand civic engagement broadly, we are focusing project activities on the level of direct engagement with local/municipal government institutions.

The work of municipalities affects the daily lives of women and girls in many ways. Women continue to be the primary caregivers in our society, and many of the services on which women rely in their daily lives are the responsibility of municipal government. Housing, transportation, childcare, and safety are just some of the issues that have a profound gender dimension. Municipal government is also the most accessible level of government where citizens can get involved in the decision-making that affects their lives.

Getting young women civically engaged and participating in the decision-making that affects their lives promotes a strong democracy and healthy communities. It also contributes to a long-term goal of increasing the representation of women on all levels of government, as it builds young women’s self-confidence, skills, social networks and experience. It also builds trust in the political system and exposes young women and girls to inspiring role models and opportunities.

## PART I. ISSUE AND COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

### CURRENT SITUATION

In the past several decades there has been a marked decline in young people’s participation in formal political processes in many Western democracies. This mirrors a general voter turnout trend. In Canada, both political party membership and voter turnout are also on decline. In the 2011 Federal Election the

general turnout rate was 61%, with the lowest turnout among the voters ages 18 to 24, comprising only 38.8% of eligible voters in that age group<sup>1</sup>.

There is a heated debate around the root causes of voter turnout decline. Apathy, lack of sense of belonging and connection to the community, lack of trust in the system and the politicians, shifting understanding of contemporary citizenship are all cited as the causes<sup>2</sup>. However, we find that this issue is too complex to be generalized and requires contextualization along multiple lines of inquiry, such as age, gender, race, class, socio-economic and ethnic background, level of education, and residence in a particular community.

When it comes to young people in particular, many researchers claim that youth do care about many political issues, however, they prefer to act on them through informal civic and political processes as opposed to engaging with formal institutions<sup>3</sup>. Informal political processes include those activities that engage with the issues affecting individuals and communities. Some of the examples include:

- Boycotting;
- Volunteering with a community group or association;
- Online activism; and/or
- Twitter exchanges of opinion on public issues/behaviors.

A recent report from Samara, a non-profit organization promoting civic engagement among Canadians, states that youth ages 18-34 are more politically interested and active than any other age group, with the exception of those activities which fall within the realm of formal politics (i.e. interacting with an elected politician or a party)<sup>4</sup>.

*Currently, there aren't any politicians that stand for our values because we are not a voting generation and many youth cannot vote. The reason why many of us do not vote is because there is not a politician that stands for our values. If a politician were to actively engage themselves in youth concerns, I think we would see a great increase in youth engagement. A female survey respondent*

<sup>1</sup> "Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group and Gender at the 2011 Federal General Election". Elections Canada. Accessed on July 25, 2013 from [http://www.elections.ca/res/rec/part/estim/estimation41\\_e.pdf](http://www.elections.ca/res/rec/part/estim/estimation41_e.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Paul Howe, *Citizens Adrift – The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians* (UBC Press, 2010). Accessed from <http://www.ubcpres.ca/books/pdf/chapters/2010/CitizensAdrift.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Briggs, Jaqueline Ellen "Young women and politics: an oxymoron?" *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2008, 11:6, pp. 579-592.

<sup>4</sup> "Lightweights? Political participation beyond the ballot box." *Samara Democracy Report #6*. Accessed on July 22, 2013 from [http://www.samaracanada.com/docs/default-document-library/samara\\_lightweights.pdf](http://www.samaracanada.com/docs/default-document-library/samara_lightweights.pdf)



There is limited research on young women’s political involvement, and yet there is a reason to believe that there are gendered differences<sup>5</sup>. The general trend speaks to the fact that young women are active and engaged, but not necessarily through the same avenues as their male counterparts. Online activism and peer-to-peer networks might be just few outlets for young women’s civic engagement utilized with marked gendered difference<sup>6</sup>, and further research is needed.

One area where women’s voices are visibly underrepresented is in the numbers of elected women. Interestingly enough, when it comes to voting in elections, there is no marked difference, and at least in the last federal election women participated at a slightly higher rate than men in all age groups up to 65 years<sup>7</sup>. However, running for elections and getting elected is a different story. While six of Canadian provincial premiers are currently women, at the federal level only 24.7% of elected officials are female. This places Canada 45<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of women’s parliamentary representation<sup>8</sup>.

At the provincial and municipal levels, on average women constitute 21% of elected members: municipal councils - 23.4%, provincial/territorial legislatures - 23.6%.

In our target communities the breakdown is as follows:

Municipality	Mayor	Council	Council	Total Male	%	Total Female	%	Total
		Male	Female					
Anmore	Female	1	3	1	20%	4	80%	5
Belcarra	Male	3	1	4	80%	1	20%	5
Burnaby	Male	6	2	7	78%	2	22%	9
Coquitlam	Male	5	3	6	67%	3	33%	9
Port Coquitlam	Male	6	0	7	100%	0	0%	7
Port Moody	Male	3	3	4	57%	3	43%	7
Surrey	Female	3	5	3	33%	6	67%	9

<sup>5</sup> Harris, Anita, “Young women, late modern politics, and the participatory possibilities of online cultures” *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2008, 11:5, pp. 481-495.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group and Gender at the 2011 Federal General Election. Elections Canada. Accessed on July 25, 2013 from [http://www.elections.ca/res/rec/part/estim/estimation41\\_e.pdf](http://www.elections.ca/res/rec/part/estim/estimation41_e.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> “Women in National Parliaments” *Inter-Parliamentary Union*. 2013. Accessed on March 6, 2013 from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

The aggregate result of 37% of female elected women across all target communities for this study is *higher* than both the provincial and the national averages, but the differences within them are quite striking. In five out of seven communities men outnumber women on the council, and in two it is the other way around. Only in one target municipality – Port Moody – there is a gender balance. There also seems to be a correlation between the gender of the mayor with the predominant gender among the city councilors for all municipalities except for Port Moody where there is an equal number of male and female councilors.

There is no data available on the age or ethno-cultural diversity on the municipal councils, which are subjects for further research.

Our interviews with stakeholders also disclosed a frustration that there is not more effective and timely information about youth voting during municipal elections in each of the target communities.

Municipalities do not have the same access to demographic information about voters and non-voters as do the provincial or federal electoral systems.

Women face numerous barriers when it comes to assuming leadership positions in all spheres, including politics. Women still perform the majority of unpaid caring work within households, including childcare. They also on average earn less than their male counterparts – 72 cents to a dollar<sup>9</sup>. These crucial structural factors affect women's access to the resources (time and money) required to run for political office.

Women are also less interested in running for an elected office. A study conducted among college students in the United States identified five key factors that hinder women's political ambition:

1. Young men are more likely than young women to be socialized by their parents to think about politics as a possible career path;
2. Young women tend to be exposed to less political information and engage in less discussion than are young men;
3. Young men are more likely than young women to have played organized sports and thus are less predisposed to competitive engagement or care about winning;
4. Young women are less likely than young men to receive encouragement to run for office – from anyone; and

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<sup>9</sup> "Earnings and Incomes of Canadians Over the Past Quarter Century, 2006 Census: Earnings." *Statistics Canada* Accessed from <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-563/p11-eng.cfm>

5. Young women are less likely than young men to think they will be qualified to run for office.<sup>10</sup>

In 2004 the Canadian Federation of Municipalities (FCM) conducted a study in six Canadian communities, and 152 FCM member municipalities took part in a national survey on women's participation:

Women interviewed for the report identified a number of reasons why they were not involved in municipal politics, including: 1. inadequate information about how to get involved; 2. lack of connections between municipality and women's groups; 3. the perception that volunteer groups afford women better opportunities to make a difference; 4. family responsibilities; 5. a lack of inclusive policies; and 6. discrimination.<sup>11</sup>

In a democratic society the diversity of constituents should be proportionally represented on all levels of political decision-making, and since women make up 52 per cent of the Canadian population, there should be proportionate representation for female constituents. The progress on closing Canada's gender gap in political representation has been surprisingly slow, and according to the latest reports, at a current rate it will take another 392 years to achieve equality in this area.<sup>12</sup> If women's voices are not adequately represented, their needs and interests are not going to be addressed. The United Nations states that a critical mass (at least 30%) of female representatives is required to have a visible influence on legislation and political culture<sup>13</sup>.

## PART II. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

For the purposes of developing this project, we embarked on a process of identifying the gaps and opportunities in our target communities when it comes to civic engagement among youth and young women in particular. We were greatly assisted in this process by Simon Fraser University's Department of Gender, Sexualities and Women's Studies. Under the leadership of Dr. Catherine Murray 15 students

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<sup>10</sup> Lawless, Jennifer and Richard Fox. "Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans Political Ambition." Washington: American University, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> *Getting to the 30% by 2026*, Canadian Federation of Municipalities, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Kate McInturff. "Closing Canada's Gender Gap: Year 2240 Here We Come!" *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*, April 2013, p.3. Accessed on July 24, 2013 from

[http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2013/04/Closing\\_Canadas\\_Gender\\_Gap.pdf](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2013/04/Closing_Canadas_Gender_Gap.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Cited in *Getting to the 30% by 2026*, Canadian Federation of Municipalities.

undertook action research projects along the lines of inquiry set out by this project. Their research became an invaluable source of information.

## METHODOLOGY

Based on the review of existing literature, which focuses mostly on youth, we put forward the following hypothesis:

1. Young women may be not interested in politics and the issues;
2. Young women may not find avenues to act on issues they care about;
3. There may be a lack of opportunities for young women to get involved;
4. There may be lack of role models for young women to follow;
5. Young women may not trust the political system or their ability to change things they care about;
6. The political system itself may not be structured in a way in which young women would be comfortable participating; and
7. Young women may face other specific barriers when they want to be involved, such as lack of time, transportation or safety issues.

Putting these forward, we were also acutely aware of the study's limitations. The lack of research on young women's political and civic engagement means that the interaction of other, mutually constraining factors like age, ethnicity, sexual identity, ability, socio-economic status or other characteristics, which some term, the 'intersectionality' of young women's identities is rarely uncovered in a meaningful way. In studies and reports young women invariably fall either within the category of 'youth', or 'women'. While we made every effort to capture this information in our needs assessment, performing the full analysis of the findings taking those factors into considerations is beyond the scope of this needs assessment.

In addition to understanding the barriers faced by youth and young women in particular, we also wanted to map each of our target communities in terms of what opportunities and programs currently exist.

Data collection methods included focus groups, in-depth interviews, written and online surveys, and analysis of secondary sources. We were looking for a balance between qualitative and quantitative data to illuminate the issues we are dealing with. All data was segregated by gender (as identified by respondents themselves, whenever possible).

The table below presents the breakdown of all data collected<sup>14</sup>:

Data source	# of participants	Female	Male	Other
Focus groups – project staff	28	15	13	
Focus groups – SFU students	42	26	16	
Surveys - project staff	113	56	56	1
Surveys - SFU students	172	120	50	2
YWCL Committee	10	10		
Interviews	13	11	2	
Total	378	238	137	3

During the course of our research we also attended a number of events which provided valuable insight on the state of the public debate on the issue, who is involved, and existing best practices. We also went into the field to observe what is happening at the city council meetings in our target communities, to observe whether youth and young women in particular are present in those spaces. We were assisted in this process by one of our project interns, a young woman herself, who used her own reflections to inform our understanding of the issues. SFU students were also engaged in community mapping as a part of their action research. We benefited from a number of fascinating explorations and findings, many of which fall outside of the scope of this report, but will be utilized for other project activities.

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## FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were conducted first to collect data on youth civic engagement in our target communities, and on how youth understand the concept itself. We set up the sessions through one of the project partners, S.U.C.C.E.S.S.

S.U.C.C.E.S.S. runs a youth employment program in three of our target communities (Burnaby, Surrey and Port Moody). Those programs are offered to youth facing various barriers to employment, including homelessness, language, single parent or Aboriginal status, and others. Conducting focus groups

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<sup>14</sup> In addition, SFU students conducted a number of interviews as part of their research action projects. Since we mostly used data from the surveys and the focus groups, only those sources of data are referenced in the table.

through an established program addressed a number of issues, including participant recruitment and access. Snacks were provided for the participants as a part of the project.

All three groups were mixed gender and were quite diverse demographically. Two of the project team members acted as the facilitators, both of whom were experienced working with diverse groups of youth, and are themselves only slightly older than most of the participants<sup>15</sup>. One of the facilitators was also an immigrant, which allowed her to connect better with immigrant youth participants.

In each of the groups we noticed a gendered dynamic where young men would express their ideas with more confidence and more freely than young women.

Each focus group was structured in the same way. We also used those sessions as an opportunity to educate youth on some of the issues embracing the participatory action approach to our research.

One of the SFU student teams worked on conducting focus groups as well (most of them with young women only), and managed to organize five sessions within a short period of two months. The findings from those discussions were also integrated into our research.

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#### YWCL WORKING COMMITTEE

The heart of the YWCL project is built on a continuing group of young women who will develop their leadership skills, orient their interests in civic engagement, and design a program of activities in their communities over the period of two years. The committee was formed from young women ages 15 to 25 living or studying in target communities to be both the beneficiaries and the leaders of the project. As such, this committee was central for the development of need assessment tools, and for providing input on key questions.

Both the focus group and the survey were administered to the committee for a test run. This allowed us not only to collect young women's opinions on the matter, but also to test the tools, and consequently improve them. Some of the questions on the survey were revised, and the flow of the focus group discussion improved.

As well, the committee explored its own orientation to civic engagement which became an important first step in building this group, and in starting the process of identifying the skills and capacities needed

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<sup>15</sup> One of the shortcomings was the fact that both facilitators were female, and for a mixed gender group setting having one female and one male facilitator would be more beneficial.

to undertake action-oriented projects that address the underrepresentation of women in civic and political life in target communities.

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## SURVEYS

A written survey was developed to be administered to a larger sample of youth. Those were administered through our Court Watching program to youth in grades 10-12 from target communities. The SFU student research team used the same survey to create an online version, and also distributed it offline on campus and through community centers. We were also assisted in this process by our supporters at the Planning Department with the City of Burnaby, who collected the surveys from Burnaby Youth Council and other youth involved with the City. Survey data was then collected, coded (following the same categories) and analyzed by each team<sup>16</sup>.

The questions were designed to find out what youth care about, how they engage in their communities, and what barriers they feel stop them from participating more. The findings of the surveys demonstrate that youth care about issues especially to do with social justice and want the opportunity to affect policy in their communities but feel there are a range of external barriers that stop them from doing so.

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## INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were held as a part of partner meetings with key stakeholders identified to date. We spoke with elected women and men, city employees facilitating youth engagement within their municipalities, activists and leaders of women's and other non-profit groups (7 women in total). Stakeholders were asked about their perspective on the challenges and successes in youth civic engagement in their communities, gender differences, barriers for young women and best practices to overcome them.

Having those conversations also provided several stakeholder engagement opportunities, as the majority admitted not having the opportunity to reflect on those questions before. At least two of the partners chose to continue their own engagement with the issues, participating fully at a later public event, and bringing forth some of the ideas discussed at our meetings.

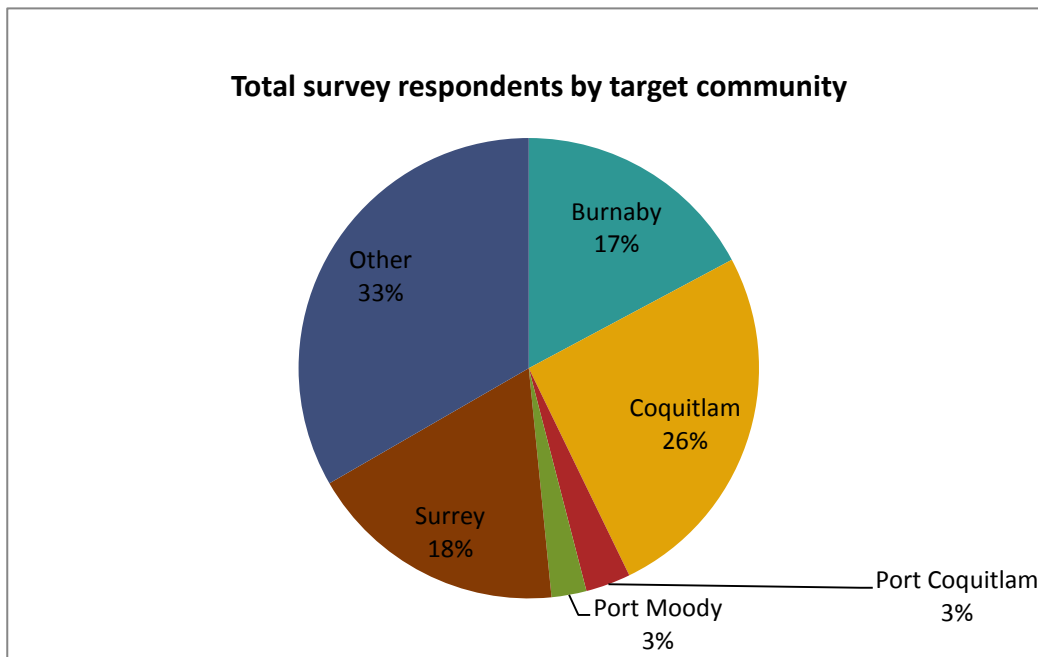
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<sup>16</sup> The findings from the surveys collected and analyzed by SFU students are treated as preliminary due to the short time frame of the course. We use those findings for comparative purposes only.

## PART III. NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESULTS

### QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The project staff gathered 113 surveys, and the SFU students gathered 172 (138 online, and 34 paper). Of the respondents who filled out surveys for the project staff, 56 people were female, 56 were male, and one was in the gender category of 'other.' The majority of the participants were from Burnaby, Coquitlam, and Surrey, the target communities with the greatest populations. 48% of participants were European/ Caucasian, 11% were mixed ethnicity, and 10% were Chinese. Most-- 79% --of the participants were between the ages of 15-18, 25% were 19-25, and 5% were 25 or older. 73% of participants were also in school (elementary or high school) and 4% noted that they also work. The next largest education demographic was university, at 15%. The rest of the demographics fell below 1% or were unanswered by participants.



The demographics of survey participants collected by the SFU students were older (78% of participants were between 19-25 years old and the same amount were in university) and the majority of participants (70%) were female, while 29% were male and 1% other. Age and the different recruitment channels can explain the difference in survey results in terms of top mentioned issues.

When asked to respond in an open-ended question, 91.6% of all respondents identified at least one issue they care about.



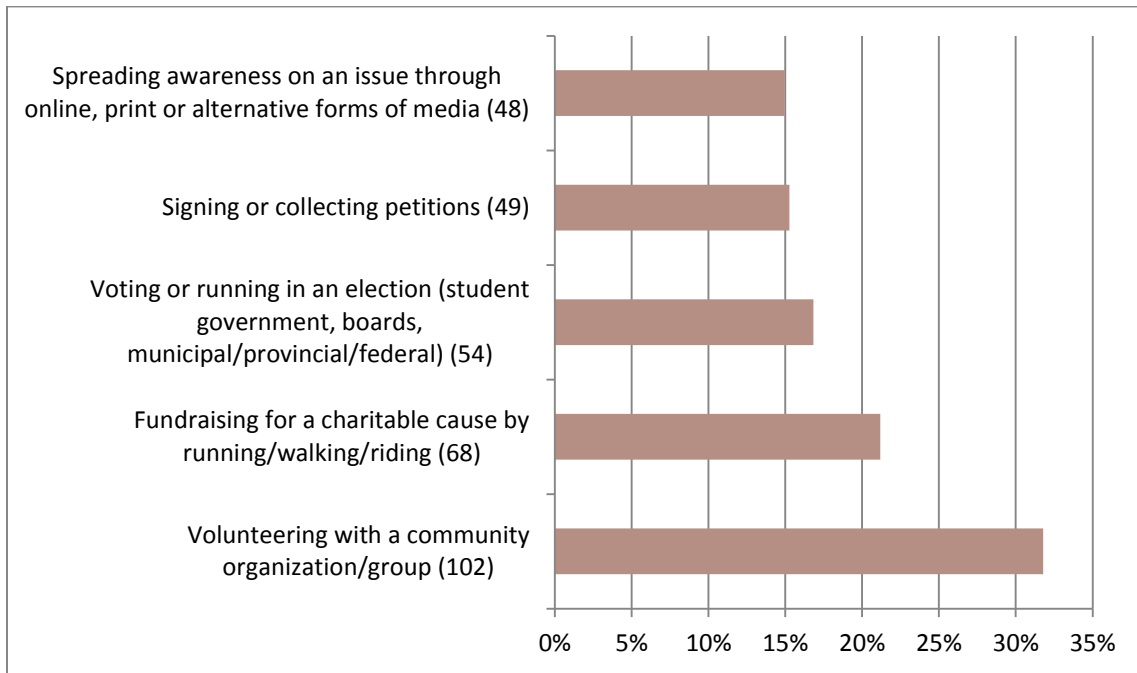
The top 5 community issues identified by youth:

Top issues in surveys collected by project staff	Top issues in surveys collected by SFU students
Social Justice	Environment and Climate Change
Violence, Abuse and Crime	Safety and Transportation
Politics	Education
Children and Youth	Children and Youth
Economy	Healthcare
Top Issues for females	Top issues for females
Social Justice	Environment and Climate Change
Children and Youth	Children and Youth
Economy	Education
Healthcare	Safety and Transportation
Women’s Issues	Social Justice
Top issues for males	Top issues for males
Social Justice	Housing
Politics	Healthcare
Violence, Abuse and Crime	Poverty
Environment and Climate Change	Economy
Transportation and Infrastructure	Education

These data suggest that youth carry a wide public issue agenda. Only one in ten youth cannot identify something they care about. Second, the mentioned items suggest a pluralistic focus: youth see many interrelated issues: no singular issue dominates. Finally, explicitly economic or political issues are in fact less often top of mind than social, health, or environmental ones, suggesting either a different orientation or different way of thinking and talking about everyday life and politics than the typical mainstream political agenda setting studies suggest<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Howe, *Citizens Adrift – The Democratic Disengagement of Young Canadians* (UBC Press, 2010). Accessed from <http://www.ubcpress.ca/books/pdf/chapters/2010/CitizensAdrift.pdf>

The second question was about the types of civic and political activity they had already engaged in. The top 5 ways people participated was the same for the YWCL and SFU surveys. The results were:



Only 1.8% of all respondents were not engaged in any of these activities. There was no significant difference between genders in terms of reported behaviors.

When the participants were asked if they felt that youth had opportunities to participate in decision making on issues, 46% said 'no', and 45% said 'yes'. The remaining 9% were either undecided or said 'yes and no'. For the SFU surveys collected, the majority of participants said 'no'. Of the females that answered, 64% said 'yes' and 36% said 'no'. Of the males that answered, 40% said 'yes' and 60% said 'no'. This means that there are more women than men who felt there are opportunities for youth to make a difference. 10% of the respondents answered that there were opportunities but they also felt that there either were not enough opportunities or it wasn't easy enough to take advantage of those opportunities.

When asked if they cared whether they had the opportunity to express their views and opinions in their community, 79% said 'yes'. However more females than males said 'yes' (of the female respondents 87% said 'yes', while 13% said 'no', and of the male respondents 71% said 'yes' and 29% said 'no'). In the surveys collected by SFU students, the majority of respondents said 'yes'.

The participants were asked what would help them participate more in their community. Not surprisingly, the most prevalent response was to be given more opportunities. The next most prevalent response was more information on how to get involved, on certain issues, and information on how the local government works. The other two most popular responses were to be given more support by community, family, role models, and friends, and to be shown that their voice matters. One response that displays the common theme of feeling unimportant or left out of community processes was, evidence that “ [someone] was actually asking and paying attention to our views.” Many of the participants wrote that although they have opinions on political and community issues, they feel unwelcomed to voice those opinions and ill-equipped to actually voice them effectively. The SFU survey data revealed very similar responses.

## QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Focus groups, interviews and participant observations allowed us to get a deeper grasp on the issues.

Many of the findings from the focus groups conducted by project staff confirmed our preliminary survey results. But they also pointed up some obvious oversights. Regardless of level of education (in post-secondary, secondary education or transitioning) youth are generally not familiar with the term “civic” or “civic engagement”. While the young people who participated in the focus group definitely cared about different issues, many had a negative perception about their peers of the same age considering them as not caring, apathetic and lazy. Overall, formal political processes do not seem to interest youth, and are perceived as not inviting. While there is a general lack of understanding of the political processes, and distrust of politicians, some forms of political engagement were identified as more inviting than others; for example, protest and petitions are seen as more accessible for youth, as opposed to city hall meetings. Those youth who are involved also felt that there are conflicting expectations about their participation: they might be consulted, but are not invited to decision-making spaces; expected to be engaged, and yet not provided with enough information to be able to do that effectively.

*They expect you to know everything and nothing at the same time. They expect you to know nothing in the sense that, ‘oh, you don’t know well enough to actually have your opinion be something valid’, but at the same time you have to know everything we’re talking about because we’re not going to explain it to you. So it’s kinda a really weird balance.*

A female focus group participant

Youth opinions differed in their analysis of how gender, class and other factors influence decision-making; some didn't recognize them at all, others believed those factors played a major role. Youth who experienced marginalization due to various factors themselves (homelessness, sexual identity, aboriginal status) were more likely to have an understanding of how systemic discrimination prevents certain groups from participating in the political process.

Youth did not feel that they are well-represented in politics; however, this idea didn't seem to be too problematic for them, which suggests that democratic representation is not a value that is seen as either important or at risk for youth.

Participants felt that in high school there are many opportunities for involvement, but unfortunately those students who are active in politics and civics in high school also tend to be stereotyped in a certain way; not everyone is comfortable being a "keener". Young women are also aware of the negative media attention that female politicians get.

Newly immigrated youth didn't feel like they know anything about the political processes in Canada, and were more focused on meeting their immediate settlement needs.

Single gender focus groups were much more effective in uncovering gendered barriers experiences by young women and girls. SFU students had a number of important additional findings which are not covered in this section, however, they are integrated into general needs assessment findings.

## DISCUSSION

The following section presents the five key findings on this preliminary study of youth civic and political engagement in the seven target communities. It also presents the top-line implications for the development of strategies to mobilize young women and men more widely which will be explored in the next phase of the project.

1. Counter to popular belief (even shared by some youth themselves), youth are not apathetic. They definitely care about the issues that affect their lives and those around them.

*Implication: Issues and action should be linked to locality.*

2. While there are efforts to engage youth in the formal political and civic processes, many youth still feel disconnected due to the lack of knowledge about how those processes work and how to get involved, or they do not believe that their engagement would make any difference.

*Implication: Youth need to see how change on issues can be effected.*

3. The key barrier for youth involvement in the formal civic and political processes is the formal structure, which includes the use of inaccessible language and rigid protocols or weak social media outreach design. Efforts to create youth-friendly spaces that are less formal can be successful in recruiting and retaining youth participants; however, they also carry a danger of creating silos and tokenism where youth are consulted, but are not part of the decision-making process, or connected to the result obtained.

*Implication: Plain language, accessible protocols, more interactive web site portals to civic engagement must be designed. This speaks to the need to reform the system of governance to make it more accessible and responsive not just for youth, but for citizens in general. It also speaks to the idea of city online portals which are more interactive and welcoming to youth social media use. Involve youth in redesign of the current civic structures, and commit to more frequent, short, quarterly bulletins on youth in the city news.*

4. Most youth are civically engaged on the level of volunteering and organizing for a cause. However, most of those activities seem to be taking place while they are in the high school, and do not translate into formal political engagement later. Young women are usually very active in taking leadership roles during that time of their life, but their participation declines once they graduate. This trend can be explained by the fact that young women are encouraged and supported by their mentors and parents in those activities at the high school level as a way to develop leadership skills, but once they attend a post-secondary institution, their extra-curricular involvement becomes more career-oriented. Since political leadership is not often seen as a common or/and desirable career path by their parents, they are often discouraged to continue their civic and political engagement. Those young women who enter the workforce, or have to work and study, face the reality of lack of time for such activities.

*Implication: Map pathways/transition from community volunteering over life course, to political engagement. Explore earlier social learning and action/experiments for techniques to habituate youth to civic and political engagement. Work with educators and post-secondary institutions to*

*identify how to involve more young men in high school civic activities, and with young women to show how these may be continued over the life course.*

5. There is a negative stereotyping of those who are actively engaged among youth. How can civic engagement be made “cool”? Such stigmatization can be especially hard on young women, as their activism and leadership can be seen as not fitting with the dominant gender norms.

*Implication: Develop specific actions and campaigns, such as local heroes and city youth branding campaigns. Develop gender-based alternatives.*

6. Young women and girls often face gendered barriers to civic and political participation which are usually invisible, and are rarely problematized. Compounded with age-specific barriers, they present a real challenge for creating equal opportunities for young women and girls to success in civic and political arenas, and to have their voices heard.

*Implication: Raise awareness about gender and age-specific barriers among young women themselves and the stakeholders.*

These findings were consistent with an extensive survey of academic and practitioner-based literature on the topic from a number of disciplines (education, social psychology, political science, youth cultural studies), and were presented to YWCL Working Committee to inform the planning of project activities.

*“I know for politics...particularly for women... expect to be judged based on how you look and how you sound and how you act. ...It doesn't matter what the politician stands for, the insults are based on what they look like. For males, if they are insulted, it's based on their intelligence...for me, that's a huge barrier. Particularly for women and young women getting involved in politics, you see that happening, and think 'why would I want to put myself out there'? So that's definitely a huge one for me.”  
A female focus group participant*

## BEST PRACTICES

There are a number of inspiring initiatives that promote civic engagement both from the municipal and grassroots levels. Through our research and engagement with the stakeholders, we compiled a list of the best practices and recommendations to increase youth civic and political participation, and to support young women in taking leadership roles in this area.

Some of the best practices for municipalities to promote civic engagement among youth:

- Make information easier to find, advertise opportunities and communicate using accessible language;
- Have publicized incentives to participate (paying for food, transportation costs, convenient times and places to meet);
- Acknowledge youth engagement through awards, provide other incentives for participation;
- Council members must be proactive in making themselves available to invitations to youth run/associated events;
- Create more opportunities for two-way mentorship and job shadowing/ intergenerational partnerships;
- Reach out and maintain connection with youth through online presence, including social media;
- Introduce online voting;
- Reduce voting age to 16;
- Create targeted initiatives and campaigns;
- Train city staff in youth engagement practices;
- Build partnerships with community NGOs that already work with youth;
- Provide training for youth who are interested in getting involved;
- Develop social networks that will help to recruit and retain youth;
- Involve youth in the decision-making, not just consultations;
- Use participatory budgeting; and
- Work with schools to make Civics classes participatory through city hall tours and other experiential learning.

Best practices to support young women's leadership in civic and political arena:

- Apply gender lens to the municipal programs, policies and processes to reduce the barriers;
- Have girl specific spaces for discussion, learning, empowerment;
- Mentorship between young women and politicians/ women in government ;
- Challenge negative media stereotypes of women in leadership roles and in politics; and
- Provide support for women to get themselves on the frontlines of campaigns by teaching them practical political skills.

## CONCLUSION

Our needs assessment process has demonstrated that it is impossible to address the issue of young women's civic and political engagement without tackling youth participation in general first. This presents a fundamental challenge of not just determining the scope of the work, but also of not losing focus on young women and girls while working on promoting youth civic engagement.

Our target communities face many of the same challenges, while also having regional specifics. We identified a number of opportunities to advance change for young women, and the next stage of the project will be focused on the development and implementation of girl-led action-oriented action projects. There is already a consensus among YWCL Committee Members that the municipal elections in November of 2014 present a perfect opportunity for mobilizing youth and raising awareness about the issue of young women's representation in all communities as a part of this project.



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